Foregrounding Harmony: Chinese International Students' Voices in Communication with Their New Zealand Peers

Prue Holmes
University of Waikato, New Zealand

Abstract: Chinese students' intercultural communication experiences in Western educational institutions have largely been examined through Eurocentric theoretical lenses, often resulting in misinterpretations of their verbal and nonverbal interactions. Instead, this paper provides new understandings of Chinese students' intercultural experiences by adopting an "Asiacentric" approach which foregrounds harmony as an epistemological, religious, and axiological base for communication. In-depth interviews with 14 Chinese international and 10 New Zealand students indicated that Chinese students sought to maintain harmony in interpersonal relations, evidenced in facework, role recognition, the place of listening and silence, and managing group work interactions. The study outcomes have implications for future research on Chinese communication, as well as understandings of Chinese international students' communication with their New Zealand counterparts in Western learning contexts. [China Media Research. 2008; 4(4): 102-110]

Keywords: Harmony, Chinese international students, intercultural communication

Introduction

Foregrounding the intersection of harmony and communication provides an opportunity for scholars, both "Eastern" and "Western," to re-examine understandings of communication among people from the "East" and those from the "West." In this paper, by focusing on the role of harmony in communication, I respond to this new direction by giving prominence to the notion of harmony—both as an epistemological foundation for theorizing Chinese communication (Chen, 2001; Ishii, 2006; Miike, 2003; 2007;), and as a value orientation (Chen & Chen, 2002; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998) that guides Chinese students' communication. Further, in order to analyse Chinese international students' interactions with their New Zealand (NZ) counterparts, the paper foregrounds an Asian/Chinese worldview, in preference for Eurocentric epistemologies and assumptions that emphasize freedom, control, individualism, and rationality. This "non-Eurocentric" approach focuses on the concept of harmony, and centralizes Chinese students' voices in the analysis, thereby enabling other insights and understandings of Chinese students' intercultural communication experiences in Western learning contexts. These insights offer scholars, educators and students new understandings of Chinese students' communication behavior.

Therefore, the research objective of the paper is to adopt an "Asiacentric" lens to examine the role of harmony in Chinese international students' communication with NZ students in a New Zealand university learning context. To achieve this goal, in this paper I first contextualise Chinese international students' learning and the challenges they face in Western learning environments. Next, a rationale for a non-Eurocentric approach to understanding communication is presented, followed by an explanation of an Asian/Chinese approach to interpreting Chinese students' communication. The research design, on which the study is based, is then briefly explained, followed by the findings describing Chinese students' communication, and where appropriate, NZ students' interpretations of these episodes. Finally, the conclusions offer new theoretical and practical insights into this communication context.

Intercultural communication challenges in the classroom

Internationalized learning contexts are now commonplace in most higher education institutions in New Zealand and many parts of the Western world. The trend of Chinese families desirous of their child/children receiving a Western, English-language based education has resulted in a new demographic in the classroom where Chinese students have a significant presence. Learning opportunities are reliant upon positive teacher/student relationships which enhance classroom dialogue and co-constructed learning (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Giroux, 1987). Further, students are encouraged to question existing power structures, knowledge, and conditions in the wider society (Pennycook, 2001), and to engage in student/teacher dialogue. Communication is thus characterized by negotiation, conflict, persuasion, and critique. These communication styles are the antithesis of Chinese classroom norms where teacher/student relationships are bounded by Confucian rules of piety (Lee, 1996), the desire to maintain harmony (Greenholz, 2003; Watkins & Biggs, 1996), and typically, where Chinese students are the receivers of knowledge, they listen and follow instructions, knowledge is transmitted by the teacher,

and competition is encouraged (Hammond & Gao, 2002).

In the New Zealand context, Chinese and NZ students, unwitting of the differences that underpin one another's communication styles, are often unsure about how to manage their intercultural interactions. They may lack understanding of culturally different ways of engaging with cultural others, intercultural sensitivity, and critical cultural awareness in negotiating tasks (Berno & Ward, 2003; Burnett & Gardner, 2006; Holmes, 2005; Holmes & O'Neill, 2005; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Further, their choices for how to communicate in this complex environment are guided by their own culturally and socially constructed rules for communication (Holmes, 2006).

Harmony in Chinese communication

Studies of intercultural interaction that have focused on cross-cultural comparisons, essentialization of cultures, and generalizations of inter-group differences have already been critiqued for outcomes that result in monolithic understandings of human behavior (e.g., Chuang, 2003; Collier, Hedge, Lee, Nakayama, & Gust, 2002; Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2004). More recently, intercultural studies have been critiqued for hegemonic Eurocentric conceptualizations as investigative "lenses" for communication that privilege certain communication styles over others, thus marginalizing other voices (Chen, 2006; Dissanyake, 2003; Kim, 2002; Said, 1976).

Chen (2001) argues that the ultimate goal of Chinese communication is "to pursue a conflict-free interpersonal and social relationship" (p. 57); competent Chinese communication is therefore evaluated according to the ability to "develop and keep a harmonious relationship between those who interact in a continuously transforming process of mutual dependency" (pp. 57-58). To this end, Miike (2003) argues that many studies of intercultural communication have not given sufficient focus to the role that harmony plays in guiding Chinese people's communication. For example, Yum (1989) argued that human communication has been accounted for in terms of personality characteristics or individual socioeconomic positions and the message itself, without adequately acknowledging the social context. Thus, quantitative studies that seek to measure an individual communicator's attributes, as seen in the many models of intercultural competence (e.g., Gudykunst, 1992; Spitzberg, 2000; Wiseman, 2002), are unable to gauge Chinese communicators' desire for mutual adaptation in the intercultural encounter. Similarly, models that are embedded in Eurocentric approaches to understanding communication in terms of efficiency and effectiveness (Thayer, 1997; Chen & Starosta, 1996) also neglect the importance Chinese people place on the need to maintain harmonious relations in the treatment of others, and on the notion of interdependent selves in promoting a harmonious society. Nor do these approaches acknowledge the dynamic mutual adaptation of communicators as they adjust messages to maintain interpersonal and situational harmony (Chen, 2002).

Therefore, a study that places harmony at the core of its enquiry will be guided by harmony as embodied in world view—in the philosophical and religious understandings of harmony as the ultimate good (Chen, 2001; Miike, 2003), and in the rules that underpin communication in interpersonal relationships.

Where worldview is concerned, Miike (2003), citing Jensen, notes that "harmony, achieving oneness with other human beings, and indeed with nature and all of life, is … a central value to cherish" (p. 254). The religious traditions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism feature harmony as the ultimate good, prioritizing the achievement of harmony among humans, things, and nature, and among the past, present and future. This worldview contrasts sharply with Western values of social, economic, and political freedom, and control over nature through science and technology.

With regard to rules for communication and treatment of others, these philosophical and religious understandings of harmony guide interpersonal relationships in all contexts. Miike (2003) outlines the following three assumptions underlying Chinese communication, all of which have harmony at their core. First, the communication context needs to be considered, that is, the ways in which harmony is at the centre of political systems, religious beliefs, historical events and philosophical thought. These macrocosms of understanding underpin the communication event and contribute towards the situation-centeredness and interdependence of communicators. Second, communication may be comprehended as active or passive at a sense-making and behavioral level. Eurocentric models of communication that emphasize and rely on overt verbal and nonverbal behaviors to measure communication effectiveness may ignore an important aspect of Chinese communication in hierarchy and role relationships where listening with full attention is stressed and communication is deferential in order to maintain harmony (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). The third assumption is that dynamic mutual adaptation of communicators—adjusting messages to maintain interpersonal and situational harmony—is central to harmonious communication.

Communication according to these three core assumptions manifests itself in several ways. Maintaining the appropriate role, being "other" oriented, and respecting hierarchy permeate the behavior and communication of Chinese individuals towards others (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). In addition, Ma (2002)

points out that Chinese communicators focus on the importance of the inter-relational self, e.g., in valuing and maintaining interpersonal and hierarchical relationships, preserving and saving face, controlling emotion, and expressing feelings indirectly.

Thus, by adopting the concept of harmony—as it pertains to Chinese understandings of the interdependent self in communication with others—we have another conceptual lens with which to make sense of Chinese students' intercultural communication in pluricultural contexts. The study presented here is guided by these epistemologies and assumptions, applying them to offer new understandings of Chinese international students' communication experiences with their NZ counterparts. The study is guided by the following two research questions:

RQ 1: How do Chinese international students structure their communication to account for the role of harmony in Chinese communication?

RQ 2: To what extent does the need to create and maintain harmony result in intercultural interruptions in communication with cultural others (in this case, NZ students)?

Research Design

Methodological choices and method

The methodology for this study draws on approaches that privilege the voices of the researched in their natural setting (Collier, 1998), by exploring the processual, contextual, relational, and dynamic nature of the communication. Further, privileging individual accounts allows for the emergence of individual multiple voices and competencies, as well as within-group diversity (Chuang, 2003; Collier, 2001). This approach enables me to respond to Miike's (2003) critique of Eurocentric methodological choices that compare and contrast co-cultures.

The research method employed semi-structured, open-ended interview questions to guide the interview process. In order to be sensitive to the need to capture and privilege Chinese students' voices, I employed a Chinese research assistant to conduct interviews with Chinese students. As a graduate with a Master's degree from the faculty where the study was located and an employee in that faculty, she was sensitive to the needs and concerns of Chinese participants. However, she chose to undertake the interviews in English because English was the language students were expected to use in this context, and she wanted to encourage their use of it. On occasions, she provided a translation of a word or phrase if the interviewee did not understand.

Concurrently, I conducted a parallel study of NZ students, using the same set of interview questions, but changing the focus to communication with Chinese students. The interview questions addressed communication in the classroom, with teachers and student peers, making friends and friendship networks, and assumptions, expectations, and experiences around group work. Where appropriate, some of these data have been included to reveal how NZ students made sense of their Chinese peers' communication. Their responses indicate a different understanding of Chinese students' culturally constructed communication.

The participants and context of the study

Fourteen Chinese students and ten NZ students were interviewed for this study. Of the 14 Chinese students, nine were female and five male. They were aged between 23 and 25 and had been studying in New Zealand from two to six years. Of the ten NZ students, six were female and four male. None of these students were New Zealand Maori (who were part of another study, not reported here). The NZ students' ages ranged from 21 to 24.

All participants were in their final year of a four year undergraduate management degree in a New Zealand university. Many of their papers required that they engage in co-constructed learning in groups to solve problems and write up and present their analysis. Therefore, in managing their inter-relational communication, students drew on their skills of negotiating, managing conflict, critiquing, and questioning during their shared learning experiences.

Procedure and analysis

The research, guided by ethical procedures for researching humans, required that participants consented to be interviewed. To preserve their anonymity I have avoided using participants' names, instead using two initials for each participant. Interview transcripts were analysed for the main themes that addressed the research questions. The emergent themes, outlined below, provide the detail or thick description (Geertz, 1983) of the students' intercultural communication experiences.

Findings and Discussion

An examination of how Chinese students structured their communication to account for the role of harmony revealed the following major themes: facework, role orientation and recognition, listening and acknowledging silence, and interpersonal communication in groups. The analysis that follows highlights the extent to which the need to maintain harmony in interpersonal relations is problematic in Chinese-NZ student intercultural interactions.

Facework

Part of maintaining harmonious relationships, thereby avoiding conflict and disagreement, consists in

face-work—giving, maintaining, and preserving face (Chen, 2002, Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). The desire to preserve and save face meant that Chinese students displayed some reluctance to respond to teachers' questions, or to engage in argument and critical debate which might result in conflict and disagreement. This reservation is summed up by one Chinese student's evaluation of his NZ counterparts' unconstrained offering of opinions and counter-arguments: "They [NZ students] don't care anything. They don't fear to speak in public or to do something special in the public" (MS).

Another explained his discomfort at the disruption to his understanding of classroom norms when surrounded by energized students debating with one another and the teacher: "Twenty five Kiwi student, five Chinese student, very strict lecturer, and it's like they just like had a lot of V drink, energy drink before they come to class. They just so crazy about talking, speak up their ideas they fresh mind… I feel a little bit lost my direction, and I feel really upset" (MZ).

Offering opinions and ideas contrary to those of the teacher or textbook is an unacceptable cultural construction for Chinese students because it is not conducive to harmonious teacher/student relations, risking the teacher to lose face. As another Chinese student noted: "In China, if student have their opinion is different with a text book or teacher said that, you will be all wrong, and so, student always afraid of [giving] their [own] opinion" (FM).

A NZ student evaluated this type of behavior by Chinese students as a way of avoiding being personally upset, rather than as a way of avoiding conflict and the accompanying possibility of losing face:

> *I've worked with some Spanish kids, a girl from Croatia, a couple of German, Yugoslav students and they are a tad [little] more Westernized I think. They will say what they think. They will argue if they don't agree, and they don't get upset or think it's a personal thing if you don't agree, which sometimes I wonder if the Chinese students do. (SM)*

Later, she qualified this misinterpretation, expressing her annoyance at what she felt was an inability on the part of Chinese students to adapt to the norms of the classroom: "[They are] still too scared to say anything…You'd think that they would have developed to a point where they could stand up for themselves and say, look, I don't understand, or whatever" (SM). Yet, a Chinese student explained the complexity of the communication challenges she faced: even after two years, she felt intimidated by other students who questioned teachers in class. She was still trying to reconstruct her classroom communication to fit with the dialogic approach which she knew was perceived as a mark of competence by her NZ peers and teachers.

Another NZ student recounted an episode where a NZ classmate asked for support from his Chinese counterpart when he (the NZ student) pointed out an error that their teacher had made. Although the Chinese student knew that the teacher was wrong, she merely muttered "don't know" when her NZ classmate asked for confirmation. While the Chinese student saved the face of her teacher, she lost face in the eyes of her NZ classmates who could not understand her response. Unable to empathize with her dilemma, the NZ students failed to understand that her response was motivated by the need to preserve their teacher's face; instead, they interpreted her lack of confirmation as betrayal. As a result, she lost the respect of her NZ peers.

However, with time, one Chinese student illustrated how he reconstructed his understanding of face. He began to realise that taking risks by voicing ideas and opinions, which may result in making a mistake, was a required learning strategy:

> *Nobody ever think about the word of losing face, because learning is [a] kind of process that you have to losing face. You have to make mistake, otherwise you can't get any improvement. And that is the New Zealand [way] I get generally from my learning experience in this University. (LK)*

And another explained his reconstruction in this way:

> *I think recently I started to notice that I'm brave enough to say well whatever I'm thinking, in the classroom, and in the tutorial, and even I discuss with the tutor and the lecturer, and right now, I will be able to argue with my group member. A long time ago that is just impossible. (PL)*

These examples illustrate the importance Chinese students place on facework in maintaining harmony, as well as the challenges they face in renegotiating and reconstructing the rules that underpin facework, much of which is unrecognized by their NZ peers.

Being "other" oriented

A further aspect of maintaining harmonious relations and thus accomplishing relational goals (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998) is manifested in acknowledging the inter-relational self. Yang (1981) pointed out that this "other" orientation results in social conformity, in concern about external opinions, and in adopting a non-offensive communication strategy for the purposes of harmony maintenance. It also includes the recognition of the inter-relationship between two parties, or *guanxi* (Chen, 2002; Gao & Ting-Toomey). Further, "other" orientation acknowledges recognition of and respect for hierarchy and role differentiation. Thus, in the following episode, a Chinese student recounts how an NZ student spoke to her slowly, causing feelings of discomfort and inferiority, thereby disrupting harmonious interpersonal relations:

> *One of my group mate[s], a Kiwi lady, ... when she talk to Kiwi student, she speak pretty fast, and she looks like really passionate and honest, and really energized, and but, when she turn around, the way that she talk to me, is like I never been involved in that conversation before. She just speak slowly first and then ask me a question that much, much easier than that what she ask to the Kiwi student. I don't feel really good about this, I have to be honest, because we're studying the same paper, no matter which level I on, we study the same thing. (ZQ)*

Not only did the NZ student disrupt inter-relational harmony, but she also ignored role parity. In the Chinese student's eyes, despite the NZ student being older, as students, they shared equal roles. Differences of language and age were perceived as unimportant by this Chinese student.

One NZ student, towards the end of her study, came to recognize the need to acknowledge the politeness strategies that underpinned Chinese students' respect for role recognition, along with the importance of establishing inter-relational harmony:

> *I knew that there was a level of politeness that was required, but I didn't realize that that was the way they were doing things. ... I make more of a point now of saying, "Do you understand? Do you agree?" so that we are all on the same page. I think it's less frustrating for us, and less frustrating for them if we can try and find a medium ground. (SM)*

And another expressed the need to demonstrate patience and reassurance in building relations through role recognition and in learning how to appropriately engage in communication, resulting in more harmonious communication:

> *I was maybe a bit impatient at the time because I didn't really know how maybe you should go slow, talk to them first a little bit, get to know them ... so they get confident being around you. It's just [a] different approach, make them feel comfortable first, make yourself feel comfortable talking to them. Yes, [my approach] probably has changed. (VP)*

The outcome of this reconstruction, she later commented, was that Chinese students came to her for explanations, clarifications, and help with their learning.

These episodes indicate the importance Chinese students attach to inter-relationality in classroom communication. NZ students' reconstruction of their own interpersonal goals to accommodate the concept of being "other" oriented resulted in positive intercultural communication outcomes and learning experiences for all.

Listening/silence in interpersonal communication

Chinese students have been socialized to practise asymmetrical and deferential patterns of communication—between parents and children, and between teacher and student (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Hammond & Gao, 2002). Listening, by showing deference and restraint, is important in maintaining relational harmony. However, Chinese students are largely required to reconstruct these patterns to demonstrate competence in the dialogical classroom, a place where students engage in co-constructed learning through argumentation and critical discussion (Giroux, 1996).

As a result, NZ students tended to stereotype Chinese students' listening-centred communication as reluctance to voice opinions and as manifesting weak language skills. In some instances, the experiences that led to these stereotypes resulted in negative attitudes. In the words of one NZ student: "I just think they need to speak up. … If you're going to sit there and just say yes, yes, yes, then where's the incentive to go further?" (SM).

Another student misinterpreted Chinese students' silence in group meetings as feelings of intimidation: "They would come to meetings and sit down and remain quiet…I don't know whether they feel intimidated. You can't really tell, but that's what I'm thinking" (LS). These misinterpretations of silence often resulted in NZ students concluding that Chinese students were unwilling to contribute in group discussions, especially in the early stages of their undergraduate study.

NZ students also attributed Chinese students' silence to language difficulties, perhaps devaluing the importance that Chinese students attribute to displays of silence and attentive listening. NZ students therefore concluded that, by the third and fourth years of their degree study, Chinese students willingly and actively contributed to discussions during group work. "The communication barriers haven't been as high…If they[Chinese students] have an idea, instead of giving up because they can't communicate it well, they'll try to make you actually understand what they are saying" (ZC).

These examples illustrate how a harmony-oriented way of communicating is unrecognised by NZ students. By misinterpreting Chinese students' preference for silence in order to preserve harmony, the NZ students undervalue Chinese students' potential to contribute their knowledge and learning in the co-construction of knowledge. On the other hand, Chinese students' willingness to contribute in the final years of their study suggests that they may have reconstructed the place of silence in the New Zealand classroom, resulting in cultural competence in this learning context. A further possible explanation might be that they have also developed their linguistic competence.

Communication in groups

As already mentioned, the "other"-oriented focus of Chinese people (Yang, 1981) aids in preserving harmonious group relations. To achieve this harmony, human relations are characterized by *gan qing*, or warm human feelings resulting from empathy, friendship, and support; and reciprocity, by showing gratitude and indebtedness (Chen, 2002; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Chinese and NZ students, however, had quite different understandings of how these principles ought to manifest themselves in group interaction.

For example, a NZ student reported the following exchange between himself and a Chinese student. The Chinese student believed that NZ students were less committed to group assignments than he was, and that NZ students "thought of themselves first and whether they were doing enough to pass. They don't look out for the group" (HD). As a result, he felt he needed to put in extra work to bring his group's work up to standard. However, when the NZ student asked him whether he had discussed these differing attitudes with his classmates, the Chinese student replied that he had not because it would be "uncomfortable" to do so. The NZ student inaccurately inferred that the Chinese student was unable to handle the "stress" required to develop and maintain meaningful relationships with cultural others, rather than recognize that such behavior would disrupt harmony in the group.

However, the following episode indicates how one Chinese student was able to reconstruct his interpersonal self to facilitate communication with other NZ students, and simultaneously, develop a leadership role:

> *In the first year, I just listen whatever Kiwis [NZ students] talking about, oh, I do this part, I do that part. I just participate. But now I just try to organize, like ... I say oh its better to have some people to doing introduction and conclusion, or some people can write to the one argument and some people can write to the second argument, and when we can have meeting, we can put them together, and smooth over that whole assignment. (XJ)*

An even more extreme example of renegotiation of rules for inter-group relations is evident in this Chinese female's assertive response when her NZ male counterpart marginalized her contribution in a group assignment:

> *I said, "Excuse me, excuse me," and repeat it for several times, and in a group we were discussing something, my opinion, and another girl also from China. Our opinion always not accepted by them. They won't listen to anything. Just say what they thought and didn't listen to you. (YR)*

She explained how she would deal with this situation if it occurred again, negating many of her Chinese rules for communication:

> *I will tell him, if you have religious belief, your religion is God or Catholic, I think the guideline is the same. They tell others to love others, but we don't need you to love me, but just respect me at least. But I didn't tell him until now, but I think I should tell him. I learned that you also needn't to respect him, and don't smile, and just to show that you are not below him. I think we are same level. We are equal, so just speak with those guys in serious face. (YR)*

By contrast, where Chinese students interpreted NZ students' behavior as not conducive to harmonious relations, judging them according to their own cultural norms, they demonstrated a preference to remain in their own cultural groups: "I don't understand them [NZ students] and I don't like their behavior. … They drink and party all the time, and they are not serious about their work" (RY). An NZ student inferred from this Chinese female student's response that her uncertainty and negativity prevented her from self-disclosing, and thus developing intercultural friendships.

Further, NZ students concluded that Chinese students who demonstrated lack of confidence in speaking were shy and unapproachable. This inference further deterred intercultural relations. The confusion in interpreting one another's behavior is summed up in this Chinese student's understanding of intercultural relations:

> *The Chinese seems to be like very isolated, like they always go together, talk together, and not like Kiwi [NZ students], just talk [to] different people. ... I didn't realize it is kind of things before, when my Kiwi friend told me that I realized like, for Chinese we have already been separate from the Kiwi[s], because we think oh, probably they don't want to talk to us, or something like, but Kiwis have the same feeling, oh probably Chinese don't want to talk to us. (CZ)*

This Chinese student's conclusion seems to suggest that *gan qing* would be difficult to attain in Chinese-NZ student friendships. Remaining apart is less problematic; that way, harmony prevails.

Conclusions

The findings from this study illustrate the importance Chinese students place on maintaining harmony in communication. However, the intercultural interruptions that often resulted from attempts to maintain harmony eventually led Chinese students, in some instances, to reconstruct and renegotiate their communication preferences and styles. Early on, they worked to create harmonious relationships, with the anticipation of friendship outside of the classroom. However, responses from NZ students often antagonized these goals.

Key findings suggested that differences in communication styles, particularly NZ students' inability to understand the importance of facework in preserving harmony, the role of listening and demonstrating silence, acknowledging role parity, and displaying inter-relationality (expressed in warm, human feeling and role recognition), all disrupted harmonious communication. For example, Chinese students perceived that NZ students lacked concern about face, showed less feeling in their treatment of others, and communicated in ways that diminished the power of Chinese students in group work and presentations, and in developing leadership roles.

Yet, intra-cultural differences also emerged among Chinese students, especially in the use of direct communication strategies which often resulted in a breach of respect of one human being to another in the intercultural encounter, thus disrupting harmonious relations. This finding suggests that some Chinese students were able to reconstruct and renegotiate their rules for communication in ways that more resembled those of NZ students, but also to empower themselves in a context where, as their voices showed, they were not treated as equals. Also, where NZ students reconstructed their rules for communication, inter-group relations became more harmonious, and concomitantly, the learning experience was more positive for both parties.

The extent to which Chinese students were able to reconstruct and renegotiate their communication styles is inevitably tied to their understandings of their humanness within the structure of their "deep" culture—worldview, (religious) beliefs, and expectations about the treatment of others. This dilemma led a NZ student to astutely conclude that Chinese students cannot disregard their culturally-embedded rules for communication, including the need to preserve harmony and all it entails in interpersonal relations: "On the one hand they've got all this freedom and stuff, but on the other hand, their actions are still seen by their peers which gets back to China" (ZC). Thus, any reconstruction of their rules for communication is primarily governed by the expectations of their in-group, that is, their other Chinese student peers in New Zealand, and their families back in China.

The outcomes of this study have some limitations. The specific context and the small sample mean that it is not possible to generalise these outcomes to other Chinese international students in other Western learning contexts. Other variables, such as linguistic and cultural competence may also impact on intercultural communication.

To conclude, this study has shown that a focus on harmony in intercultural communication provides a new lens with which to understand why Chinese students privilege certain ways of communicating. The study has also attempted to demonstrate why and how NZ students misinterpret Chinese students' communication. In this sense, the analysis has responded to the first of Miike's (2006) calls, that is, to develop a non-Eurocentric agenda by developing theoretical insights from Asian cultures, in this case, the place of harmony in Chinese students' communication with their NZ counterparts. To this end, the theoretical and methodological approach that guided this study has implications for future research that seeks to empower Chinese students' voices. In a practical sense, the research outcomes offer administrators, teachers, and students in receiving educational institutions new ways of understanding Chinese students' communication.

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Correspondence to:
Dr Prue Holmes
Department of Management Communication
Waikato Management School
University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton, New Zealand
Telephone: +64 (07) 838 4141
Email: pholmes@waikato.ac.nz

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